



## Examining Athletic Identity and Religious Orientation Between Student-Athletes at Religious and Non-Religious Practicing Institutions

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*Previous research has shown strength of religious beliefs to be an important source of identity and well-being in the lives of many student-athletes, yet less is known about the way student-athletes approach their lives in light of their religious beliefs. To better understand the intersection between religion and identity development, the current study examined the relationships among student-athletes' religious orientation (RO) and athletic identity before comparing them between those competing at religious practicing institutions (RPis) and non-religious practicing institutions (NRPIs). Student-athletes at RPis (n = 218) and NRPIs (n = 153) completed valid measures of athletic identity and RO during their athletic seasons. Results of independent t-tests showed student-athletes at NRPIs reported significantly stronger and more exclusive athletic identities, and significantly lower intrinsic RO, compared to those at RPis. Post hoc, conditional effects, analyses indicated the relationship between intrinsic RO and athletic identity of student-athletes also differed on the basis of institutional affiliation. Findings shed light on the way student-athletes' religious beliefs relate to athletic identity and invite researchers to consider how institutional climate could indirectly impact the holistic needs of student-athletes.*

*Keywords: college, university, sport, religion, self-concept*

Historically, collegiate athletic programs have prioritized support for the physical needs of student-athletes over other essential human needs (Waller et al., 2016). Researchers, coaches, and student-athletes on the other hand agree that mental wellness, in particular, is a critical need that has been overlooked (Newton et al., 2019; NCAA, 2016). The expanding discussion around student-athlete wellness has challenged athletic organizations, departments, and stakeholders to embrace a new philosophy that advocates for the holistic care of student-athletes (Debois et al., 2015; Fisher et al. 2017; Knust & Fisher, 2015; Schinke et al., 2018; Waller et al., 2016). Holistic care extends beyond the physical domain and accommodates individuals' total human needs including their psychological, social, economic, and cultural health (Papathanaïou et al., 2013). Such care requires all athletic stakeholders (e.g., coaches, counselors, sport medicine staff), to accept people's individuality and to carefully consider the weight assigned to each of their individual needs. While this philosophy is considered standard practice in many health care settings, increased efforts have been directed toward its establishment in athletic settings (Papathanasiou et al., 2013; Waller et al., 2016).

In support of this paradigm shift, the National Collegiate Athletic Association's (NCAA) released a helpful resource designed to elucidate the mental health concerns of student-athlete and to help athletic departments develop and employ strategies to effectively support student-athlete wellness (Brown et al., 2014). The resounding message echoed throughout this resource points to the lack of guidance student-athletes receive when it comes to navigating common psychological stressors associated with the student-athlete role (Brown et al., 2014).

Collegiate student-athletes are asked to balance multiple roles, to varying degrees, and these individuals face unique challenges in doing so (Bimper, 2014; Brewer et al., 1993; Settles et al., 2002; Yukhymenko-Lescroart, 2014). In order to excel in the athletic arena, student-athletes are required to navigate an array of social, developmental, and academic challenges (Petrie et al., 2010) in addition to demands related to competitive sport including: private skill practice, physical conditioning, and busy competition schedules (Strum et al., 2011). Considering these demands, it is not surprising that many student-athletes experience increasing levels of stress (Krieg, 2013) and struggle to make time for other opportunities that may be critical for meeting their holistic needs (Yukhymenko-Lescroart, 2018).

Successfully managing duties across multiple contexts (e.g., sport, school, etc.) raises questions about the nature and process of identity development as it relates to the way student-athletes act in various roles (Beron & Piquero, 2016; Houle, & Kluck, 2015; Huml et al., 2019). While research has long acknowledged an individual's identity as a central component of human development (Erikson, 1968), contemporary literature suggests the development of multiple non-sport roles can be instrumental for promoting long-term psychosocial outcomes that contribute to student-athlete well-being (Schinke et al., 2018; Steele et al., 2020; van Rens et al., 2019). For example, cultural identity expression may reduce stress among minoritized student-athletes (Schinke et al., 2018). Further, academic identity is positively related to academic performance and life satisfaction (van Rens et al., 2019), protective against identity crisis upon athletic retirement, and linked with successful career transitions (Steele et al., 2020). Therefore, it seems pertinent to investigate the development of multiple identities and the role they play in the ongoing process of student-athlete identity development.

### *Theoretical Framework*

Identity is broadly defined as a multidimensional view of oneself (Erikson, 1968) and is known to have both dynamic and enduring qualities that influence role-related behavior (Stryker & Burke, 2000). Identity theory, which serves as framework for the current study, suggests an individual's identity is made up of multiple distinct components also referred to as roles (Stryker, 1968). For example, an individual's role may include the fact that they are an athlete, student, or family member. Roles allow people to define who they are based on self-conceptions as well as social appraisals gleaned from interactions with people across multiple life domains (Lally, 2007; Markus, 1977; Stryker & Serpe, 1994). While an individual's roles are often shaped by others engaged in similar roles (e.g., coaches, teammates), such comparisons are theorized to be based on others' uniqueness rather than group-based similarities (Stets & Burke, 2000). In other words, student-athletes may modify their perceptions of what it means to be an athlete based on the extent to which a teammate's (or coach's) behavior aligns with their current role rather than the way the team behaves as a collective group.

Multiple identities are also proposed to exist within a salience hierarchy whereby more prominent roles (higher in the salience hierarchy) are likely to persist over time and govern behavior across contexts (Stryker, 1968; Stryker & Burke, 2000). Identity salience depends on an individual's commitment to a given role, reflected in the number and significance of social connections they have within that role (Stryker, 1968; Stryker & Burke, 2000). For example, student-athletes who invest in meaningful relationships across a large network of student-athletes, coaches, and sport medicine staff over the course of a 4-year program would be more committed to the athlete role than a student-athlete who transfers to the program during their final year of eligibility. Moreover, highly salient roles have been shown to be associated with a greater sense of purpose and meaning in life and are, in turn, recognized as a key determinant of mental and physical well-being (Thoits, 2012). Taken together, identity theory offers researchers a useful lens through which to examine the salience of multiple roles among student-athletes and the degree to which those roles relate to one another.

### *Athletic Identity*

Brewer and colleagues (1993) defined athletic identity as "the degree to which an individual identifies with the athlete role" (p. 237). Research has shown that athletic identity is generally stronger early in a student-athlete's career and is often reported as the most salient aspect of their identity (Kimball, 2007; van Rens et al. 2019; Yukhymenko-Lescroart, 2014). Similar to other social roles, like that of being a student, spouse, or religious person, people's identities are perpetually evolving over time. To better understand the way athletic identity moves within an individual's salience hierarchy, more recent research has focused on distinguishing the measurable differences between strength and exclusivity of athletic identity (Cieslak, 2004; Good et al., 1993). Moreover, the strength of one's athletic identity commonly refers to the perceived significance of athletic endeavors, while the dimension of exclusivity is primarily concerned with the degree to which one invests in the athletic role relative to other facets of their identity (e.g., student, family, career). Someone with a strong athletic identity, aiming to earn international sport recognition, for example, may identify most strongly with their role as an athlete compared to other prominent, but less salient, roles (Brewer et al., 1993).

The exclusivity of an individual's athletic identity, on the other hand, may be indicated by their (in)ability to allocate time to maintaining a variety of other aspects of their identity, beyond their role as an athlete (Sturm et al., 2011). Investment in such ambitious athletic pursuits often come at the expense of one's involvement in other important life domains and have been shown to be associated with negative outcomes. For example, work by Huml et al., (2019) found student-athletes who identified more exclusively with the athletic role were more likely to earn a lower grade point average than their less-exclusive counterparts. Interestingly though, student-athletes' overall strength of athletic identity was not related to grade point average, thus exemplifying the importance of acknowledging exclusivity as a particularly important dimension of athletic identity.

While existing evidence in the general population have shown positive associations between people who invest in multiple identities and subjective indicators of well-being such as happiness and life satisfaction (Thoits, 1983, 2012), research in student-athlete populations remains somewhat unclear and has been almost exclusively restricted to academic and athletic roles (van Rens, 2019). A recent review by Steele and colleagues (2020) showed individuals who pursue dual careers in athletics and academics often fail to engage in alternative social opportunities and unintentionally narrow their identity until it is exclusively focused on maintaining a single role, a concept referred to as identity foreclosure (Marcia, 1980; Murphy et al., 1996; Petitpas & France, 2010). Indeed, student-athletes have been shown to report greater identity foreclosure compared to other students required to maintain dual roles (e.g., fine arts students) as well as non-athlete college students (Linnemeyer & Brown, 2010).

Although much of the literature related to athletic identity focuses on the concept of identity foreclosure, a review by Brewer and Petitpas (2017) highlighted that correlates and consequences of athletic identity can vary considerably across several domains including academic, cognitive, social, and emotional. For example, in the academic domain, student-athletes who identified strongly with the athlete role were also found to identify more strongly with the role of a student (Yukhymenko-Lescroart, 2014). However, higher athletic identity has also been shown to be negatively associated with student-athletes' personal adjustment to college (Melendez, 2009). In the cognitive domain, athletic identity has been shown to have positive associations with student-athletes' sport commitment (Horton & Mack, 2000) as well as their level of competitiveness (Daniels et al., 2005), which could offer benefits within the athletic context. In the social domain, higher athletic identity consistently leads to positive outcomes including a caring team climate (Poux & Fry, 2015) and enhanced peer network (Horton & Mack, 2000). Furthermore, athletic identity has also been shown to be positively correlated with important vocational factors including career-decision-making self-efficacy and optimism about the future, which hold promise for increasing the quality of student-athletes' responses across stressful sport and non-sport transitions (Cabrita et al., 2014).

Research in the emotional domain is slightly less consistent than findings in relation to other domains. For example, athletic identity positively correlates with athlete satisfaction (Burns et al., 2012), but exclusivity negatively correlates with athlete satisfaction (Burns et al., 2012) and quality of career transition (Park et al., 2013). Moreover, work by Masten et al. (2006) has shown exclusivity to be unrelated to anxiety severity among athletes, while other evidence exists linking exclusivity to burnout (Gould & Whitley, 2009) and substance use (Brewer & Petitpas, 2017).

Notably, a systematic review by Park and colleagues (2013) provided evidence that athletic identity is associated with quality of career transitions, such that those higher in athletic

identity experience greater distress during career transitions. Thus, the potential negative effects of athletic identity and foreclosure on career transition should not be overlooked given that approximately 98% of NCAA athletes will experience such a transition by the end of their college career (NCAA, 2011). Overall, these research findings suggest effectively managing identities can lead to positive outcomes for student-athletes and their teams while highlighting the potential deleterious effects of exclusivity. Thus, identifying ways to foster a more productive athletic identity, while simultaneously minimizing exclusivity, is of particular importance to protect and enhance holistic student-athlete development.

Although a robust body of research has outlined the role of athletic identity across four domains (i.e., academic, cognitive, social, and emotional), religion and its relationship to athletic identity and exclusivity is often overlooked. This is particularly surprising as athletes frequently report turning to religion in preparation for, and in the midst of, competition as well as during times they are afflicted by injury or career transitions (Kelley et al., 1990; Ebstyne King, 2003; Watson & Nesti, 2005). This gap in the literature represents an opportunity to develop a more complete understanding of the way other salient roles, deemed central to one's sense of self, relate to their athletic identity (Brewer & Petitpas, 2017; Ebstyne King, 2003; Proios, 2017).

### *Religion*

Defining religion has been a perpetual source of controversy among scholars and, to date, no universal definition exists. However, religion was most aptly defined by Koenig and colleagues (2001) as an organized system of beliefs, practices, rituals and symbols designed to facilitate closeness to the sacred or transcendent (God, higher power, or ultimate truth/reality). This definition has been widely adopted by researchers studying religious behavior, psychological processes underlying religion, and various health outcomes for decades (Paloutzian & Park, 2014). Most pertinent to the current study, was a review by Morieria-Alamedia & Neto (2006) who synthesized decades of research on the relationship between religiousness and mental health. General findings proposed that the majority of well-conducted scientific studies have shown a positive relationship between religious involvement and various aspects of mental health including well-being, optimism, and hope. Although this relationship has robust support and application, scholars agree that much less attention has been directed toward empirically evaluating psychosocial mechanisms (e.g., sense of meaning, cognitive framework, and social identity, etc.) potentially driving that relationship (Hayward & Krause, 2014; Morieria-Alamedia & Neto, 2006). For an in-depth review of proposed mediators of the religion and mental health relationship, see Paloutzian & Park, (2014). Therefore, it seems pertinent to explore pathways through which different facets of religion may influence mental health and well-being and how they might relate to student-athletes.

From a psychosocial perspective, religion is unique in that it invites people to engage in the exploration of what can (or cannot) be known and what can (or cannot) exist. This process allows people to develop a deep sense of personal significance and life meaning which often drives behavior (Mahoney et al., 2005; Pargament, 2001). Moreover, when religious beliefs are internalized and subsequently reinforced by one's social environment, they offer a profound sense of belonging and conviction toward greater life purposes (Haslam et al., 2009; Ebstyne King, 2003). Previous research also suggests internalized religious beliefs influence the way people manage stressful life events and associated suffering by providing a means to: reduce existential uncertainty, enhance a sense of control, and develop coping skills and resources to

manage anxiety (Hayward & Krause, 2014). Taken together, religion stands to offer a sense of meaning and a belief system that has the potential to benefit anyone expected to encounter and endure frequent stressful circumstances.

Not surprisingly, research has shown religion to play a prominent role in the lives of many student-athletes participating at varying levels of competition and across collegiate divisions (Balague, 1999; Hoffman, 1992; Kelley et al., 1990; Storch et al., 2001; Storch & Storch, 2002; Storch et al., 2004; Vernacchia et al., 2000; Watson & Nesti, 2005). In fact, all but one study (Bell et al., 2009) found student-athletes were more religious than their non-athlete student counterparts (Fischer, 1997; Storch et al., 2001; Storch et al., 2004). Although many of the aforementioned studies were able to detect differences related to the overall strength of student-athletes' religious beliefs, these findings remain limited to a global measure of religious strength (e.g., Santa Clara Strength of Religious Faith Questionnaire; Plante & Boccaccini, 1997) and fail to capture the more nuanced differences pertaining to how student-athletes attempt to enact their religion across various contexts.

*Religious Orientation.* Religious orientation (RO) specifies the way people approach their lives and daily activities in light of their religious beliefs (Cohen & Hill, 2007; Donahue, 1985a; Donahue 1985b). RO is comprised of two dimensions, intrinsic and extrinsic, each of which exist on a continuum (Gorsuch & McPherson, 1989; Kahoe & Meadow, 1981). Those who report a strong intrinsic RO are more likely to internalize the precepts of their religion and rely on it to inform decisions across various life endeavors (Allport, 1966; Allport & Ross, 1967; Kelley et al., 1990; Koenig et al., 2001). In other words, such people tend to rely on their religious beliefs to bring harmony to all other aspects of their lives. In the context of sport, a student-athlete led by a strong intrinsic RO may rely on their religious beliefs to guide their on-going interactions with teachers, coaches, opponents, and officials despite their athletic status or performance-related outcomes. On the other hand, those who report a more extrinsic RO tend to use their religion for their own ends (Allport, 1966; Allport & Ross, 1967). That is, student-athletes with strong extrinsic RO may rely on their religion to bring them solace, status, pain relief, or renewed strength for their athletic endeavors. Kelley and colleagues (1990) put it most succinctly when they described people with an extrinsic RO as those who “turn to God, but without turning away from self” (p. 148).

To date, only a few published studies have directly assessed RO of student-athletes. Findings consistently suggest that student-athletes are more religious and significantly more likely to report higher intrinsic RO than their non-athlete student counterparts (Bell et al., 2009; Fischer, 1997; Kelley et al., 1990, Storch et al. 2001). Similarly, data derived from samples of student-athletes competing at both NRPIs and RPIs confirmed those attending RPIs reported significantly higher intrinsic RO, and significantly lower extrinsic RO, relative to those attending NRPIs (Bell et al., 2009; Kelley et al., 1990). Moreover, data put forth by Kelley et al. (1990) showed higher intrinsic RO to be associated with a greater focus on personal goals, less emphasis on winning, and greater pleasure experienced during competition. These relationships were reversed for those who reported greater extrinsic RO. Taken together, the empirical literature suggests religious beliefs serve an important role in the lives of many student-athletes (Balague, 1999; Hoffman, 1992) and, consequently, may influence the way student-athletes interpret and manage challenges in life and sport (Kelley et al., 1990). Additionally, qualitative data supports the notion that student-athletes, with highly salient religious beliefs, perceive themselves to be uniquely equipped to cope with uncertainties, recover from hardships, and fully commit to their

sport obligations (Stevenson, 1997). Similarly, Seitz and colleagues (2014) concluded student-athletes' religious well-being appeared to be intimately connected to outcomes in other domains (i.e., athletic, academic, and social) and was particularly influential for student-athletes who described integrating their religion into nearly every aspect of their lives.

While the aforementioned studies highlight several positive outcomes associated with having strong religious beliefs, they each fall short of explaining how such beliefs directly relate to an individual's athletic identity. To date, only a single study has examined the relationship between religion and athletic identity (Proios, 2017). Results indicated weak, yet significant, positive relationships between athletes' strength of religious faith and multiple dimensions of athletic identity including: social identity ( $r = 0.28$ ), exclusivity ( $r = 0.21$ ), and negative affectivity ( $r = 0.13$ ; Proios, 2017). However, results were preliminary and lacked generalizability due to the use of a global measure of religious strength, thus making it impossible to know whether a specific RO might be associated with a more (or less) productive athletic identity.

### *Purpose and Hypotheses*

Many student-athletes acknowledge their roles as both athletes and religious individuals, albeit to widely varying extents, (Balague, 1999; Hoffman, 1992; Kelley et al., 1990; Storch et al., 2001; Storch & Storch, 2002; Storch 2004; Vernacchia et al., 2000; Watson & Nesti, 2005) and that exploring multiple roles protects against identity foreclosure (Marcia, 1980; Murphy et al., 1996; Petitpas & France, 2010; Steele et al., 2020). However, there is a lack of research aimed at understanding the way religious beliefs relate to various dimensions of athletic identity. Therefore, the primary purpose of the current study was to examine the relationship among student-athletes' RO and their athletic identities. Due to the lack of available data examining these specific relationships, no a priori hypotheses were set.

Furthermore, research by Di Lu et al. (2018) have identified the importance of organizational factors (i.e., institutional ranking) as they relate to salience of student-athlete identity. Findings showed student-athletes attending institutions with higher academic rankings were found to have more salient academic identities whereas those who attended institutions with higher athletic rankings were found to have stronger athletic identities (Di Lu et al., 2018). Though results were confined to traditional (i.e., athletic and academic) roles of the student-athlete and thus provide little insight into their religious beliefs, they suggest organizational factors may be important to consider when examining identity salience of student-athletes from different institutions. Hence, a secondary purpose of the current study was to compare athletic identity and RO of student-athletes with respect to their institutional affiliation.

In line with identity theory and findings from existing research examining religious beliefs between NRPI and RPIs (Bell et al., 2009; Fischer, 1997; Kelley et al., 1990, Storch et al. 2001), it was hypothesized that student-athletes competing at RPIs would score significantly higher on measures of intrinsic RO and significantly lower on the exclusivity dimension of athletic identity relative to those competing at NRPIs.

## Method

### Participants

The current study included a total of 371 collegiate student-athletes ( $M_{\text{age}} = 20.2$  years; 232 women, 139 men) each of which reported being actively engaged in varsity sport at the time of data collection. Forty-one percent of student-athletes competed for athletic teams at NRPIs that had no established religious requirements, whereas 59% of student-athletes competed at RPIs. Those attending RPIs were expected to engage in mandatory chapel/worship services and religious courses to fulfill college degree requirements. Researchers relied on convenience sampling to select institutions and recruit participants that aligned with the study's purpose.

The majority of student-athletes reported competing in NCAA Division II (79%) followed by NAIA (12%), NCAA Division I (6%), and "other" collegiate athletic programs not listed in the survey (3%). Six varsity sports were represented in the current study with the highest percentage coming from soccer (27%), track and field (22%), baseball (18%), basketball (16%), softball (9%), and volleyball (8%). Refer to Table 1 for additional demographic data related to sex and academic status.

Table 1  
*Demographic Characteristics of Student-athletes by Institutional Affiliation*

	RPIs ( <i>n</i> = 218)		NRPIs ( <i>n</i> = 153)		Total ( <i>n</i> = 371)	
	n	%	n	%	n	%
<b>Sex</b>						
Male	89	40.8	50	32.7	139	37.5
Female	129	59.2	103	67.3	232	62.5
<b>Classification</b>						
First Year	42	19.3	42	27.5	84	22.6
Second Year	53	24.3	35	22.9	88	23.7
Third Year	60	27.5	31	20.3	91	24.5
Fourth Year	53	24.3	34	22.2	87	23.5
Fifth Year	10	4.6	11	7.2	21	5.7

*Note.* RPIs = Religious Practicing Institutions. NRPIs = Non-Religious Practicing Institutions.

### Measures

**Athletic Identity Measurement Scale.** Athletic identity was measured using the Athletic Identity Measurement Scale (AIMS; Brewer & Cornelius, 2001). The AIMS is a widely used measure of the degree to which an individual identifies with their athletic role (Brewer & Cornelius, 2001; Martin et al., 2001; Visek et al., 2008). The AIMS is a multidimensional



measure of athletic identity comprised of seven items with three first-order factors including: social identity (e.g., I consider myself an athlete), exclusivity (e.g., sport is the most important part of my life), and negative affectivity (e.g., I would be very depressed if I were injured and could not compete in sport; Brewer & Cornelius; Martin et al., 1997). Studies have since reported a combination of total AIMS scores and scores representing each factor as a stand-alone subscale (e.g., Huml et al., 2019; Lamont-Mills & Christensen, 2006; Proios, 2017). For the purposes of this study, the 7-item, 3-factor model was used as the choice measure and AIMS total scores and an exclusivity subscale scores were examined as our primary dependent variables. Scores based on other factors (negative affectivity and social identity) were unreliable within the present sample ( $\alpha < .61$ ; see Tables 2 and 3). While this is likely due to the small number of items associated with each factor, we opted to omit these subscales of athletic identity from further analysis (Tavakol & Dennick, 2011).

All items were rated on an even numbered response scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 6 (strongly agree) with the purpose of encouraging participants to indicate some level of agreement or disagreement (Dillman et al., 2014). Responses to each item were used to generate mean scores that represent an overall measure of athletic identity and exclusivity where higher scores were indicative of stronger identification with the athletic role. The AIMS has previously shown sufficient internal consistency ( $\alpha = .76 - .81$ ; Visek et al., 2008; Brewer & Cornelius, 2001, respectively). In the current study, the AIMS was found to have an acceptable level of internal consistency ( $\alpha = .71$ ), which is consistent with previous research conducted with athletic populations (Proios, 2017).

*Religious Orientation Scale-Revised.* Participants' RO was measured using the Religious Orientation Scale-Revised (ROS-R) also known as the Intrinsic/Extrinsic-Revised Scale originally developed by Gorsuch and McPherson (1989). This 14-item measure was designed to assess both intrinsic and extrinsic RO (Maltby, 1999). Intrinsic RO was captured using an 8-item subscale including questions such as: "My whole approach to life is based on my religion" and "I often have a strong sense of God's presence." However, a 6-item subscale was used to measure extrinsic orientation which included questions like: "I pray mainly to gain relief and protection" and "What religion offers me most is comfort in times of trouble and sorrow." Respondents rated all items on a 5-point scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). The psychometric properties of the ROS-R have been investigated across multiple studies (Maltby, 1999; Maltby, 2002) and the current study has demonstrated good internal consistency for both intrinsic ( $\alpha = .85$ ) and extrinsic ( $\alpha = .78$ ) dimensions.

## *Procedures*

Prior to data collection, all procedures were reviewed and approved by the respective Institutional Review Boards at all participating institutions. The research team used a multi-pronged recruitment strategy including: team meetings, electronic invitations, and word of mouth recruitment at local athletic events. Each member of the research team participated in all aspects of recruitment process between 2017 and 2019. Once participants were informed of the scope and nature of the research, electronic informed consent was obtained via Qualtrics software prior to beginning the survey. During team meetings, participants were sent an email with the survey link on site and given the choice to use their mobile device to complete the survey or sit quietly while using their device for personal use. If not present at the team meeting, participants were

emailed a description of the research which consisted of an embedded link to the survey that invited them to complete it at a time that was more convenient for them. The online survey was completed within approximately 10 minutes. Participants who completed the survey were also given the opportunity to enter in a random drawing for gift cards. In an attempt to protect anonymity, coaches and athletic staff were not present during data collection.

### *Data Analysis*

Participants were initially grouped by self-reported institutional affiliation before descriptive statistics and bivariate (Pearson's  $r$ ) correlation coefficients were calculated across all study variables. Independent sample  $t$ -tests were conducted to compare means of key study variables between student-athletes competing at NRPIs and RPIs. Since independent sample  $t$ -tests were used to compare the means of key study variables (e.g., intrinsic RO) between student-athletes at NRPIs and RPIs, negative and positive  $t$  statistics can be interpreted in the same way. That is, that the mean responses were statistically different. Mean values of each study variable were then examined in order to interpret the significant  $t$  statistic. Cohen's  $d$  effect sizes were also calculated. Effect sizes were classified as small ( $d = .20$ ), medium ( $d = .50$ ), or large ( $d = .80$ ; Cohen, 1988).

Researchers also conducted post-hoc analyses, which included dichotomous moderation analyses, intended to examine the conditional effects of institution affiliation. Conditional effects were assessed using the *PROCESS* software macro and statistical significance was determined when  $p < .05$  (Hayes, 2013). In line with recommendations by Hayes (2013), significant interactions were probed by estimating the conditional effects of the focal predictors at both values of the dichotomous moderator (i.e., NRPIs and RPIs). All other statistical analyses were carried out using SPSS version 27.

Prior to conducting independent  $t$ -tests, intrinsic RO statistical outliers were identified by means of boxplot inspection (Bakker & Wicherts, 2014). Following procedures introduced by Tukey (1977), we identified five values which were greater than 1.5 box-lengths (Interquartile Range) from the edge of the box. These participants were excluded from all subsequent analyses. Identified outliers were both members of NRPIs and RPIs and did not share any common characteristics. Once outliers were removed, intrinsic RO for both NRPIs and RPIs samples met the assumptions of normality and homogeneity of variance.

## **Results**

### *Athletic Identity*

Results of independent  $t$ -tests showed that student-athletes competing at RPIs and NRPIs reported significantly different levels of athletic identity ( $t(369) = -2.86, p < .01; d = 0.30$ ). Specifically, student-athletes at RPIs reported lower athletic identity than those at NRPIs. Similarly, student-athletes competing at RPIs and NRPIs reported significantly different levels of exclusivity ( $t(369) = 3.42, p < .01; d = 0.35$ ). According to Cohen (1988), the effect sizes for both of the aforementioned analyses qualify as small effects ( $d = 0.20$ ).

### Religious Orientation

Additionally, results of independent *t*-tests showed student-athletes competing at RPIs and NRPIs reported significantly different levels of intrinsic RO ( $t(369) = 8.58, p < .01; d = 0.90$ ). The effect size for this analysis was found to exceed Cohen's (1988) convention for a large effect ( $d = 0.80$ ). These results indicate that student-athletes competing at RPIs reported significantly higher intrinsic RO, than those at NRPIs. Notably, there were no significant differences between student-athletes at RPIs and NRPIs, with respect to extrinsic RO ( $t(369) = 1.06, p = .29$ ). See Table 2 to review all descriptive statistics and correlation coefficients for student-athletes who competed at NRPIs and Table 3 for data on those who competed at RPIs.

### Relationship between Athletic Identity and Religious Orientation

Intrinsic RO and the exclusivity dimension of the AIMS ( $r = -.32, p < .01$ ) were negatively correlated, whereby an increase in intrinsic RO was associated with a decrease in exclusivity of athletic identity. However, this relationship was only statistically significant among student-athletes competing at RPIs. Intrinsic and extrinsic RO were positively correlated with one another among student-athletes competing at both NRPIs ( $r = .57, p < .01$ ) and RPIs ( $r = .14, p < .05$ ). Refer to Table 2 to review the correlation matrix for student-athletes at NRPIs and Table 3 for those at RPIs.

Table 2

#### *Descriptive Statistics and Correlations at Non-religious Practicing Institutions*

	A	<i>M</i> ± <i>SD</i>	1	2	3	4	5	6
1. Intrinsic RO	.80	2.95 ± .82	-					
2. Extrinsic RO	.80	2.83 ± .82	.57**	-				
3. Athletic Identity	.69	5.01 ± .60	.04	.03	-			
4. Social Identity	.36	5.56 ± .49	.05	-.02	.68*	-		
5. Exclusivity	.76	4.38 ± 1.22	.12	.06	.84**	.47**	-	
6. Negative Affectivity	.61	4.83 ± .99	-.08	.01	.70**	.19*	.32**	-

*Note.* RO = Religious Orientation; \* =  $p < .05$ , \*\* =  $p < .01$

Table 3  
*Descriptive Statistics and Correlations at Religious Practicing Institutions*

	$\alpha$	$M \pm SD$	1	2	3	4	5	6
1. Intrinsic RO	.85	3.67 $\pm$ .78	-					
2. Extrinsic RO	.76	2.93 $\pm$ .72	.14*	-				
3. Athletic Identity	.71	4.82 $\pm$ .66	-.27**	.17*	-			
4. Social Identity	.42	5.52 $\pm$ .49	-.10	.02	.68**	-		
5. Exclusivity	.78	3.95 $\pm$ 1.22	-.32**	.17*	.84**	.46*	-	
6. Negative Affectivity	.58	4.63 $\pm$ 1.07	-.14*	.16*	.74**	.27**	.38**	-

Note. RO = Religious Orientation; \* =  $p < .05$ , \*\* =  $p < .01$

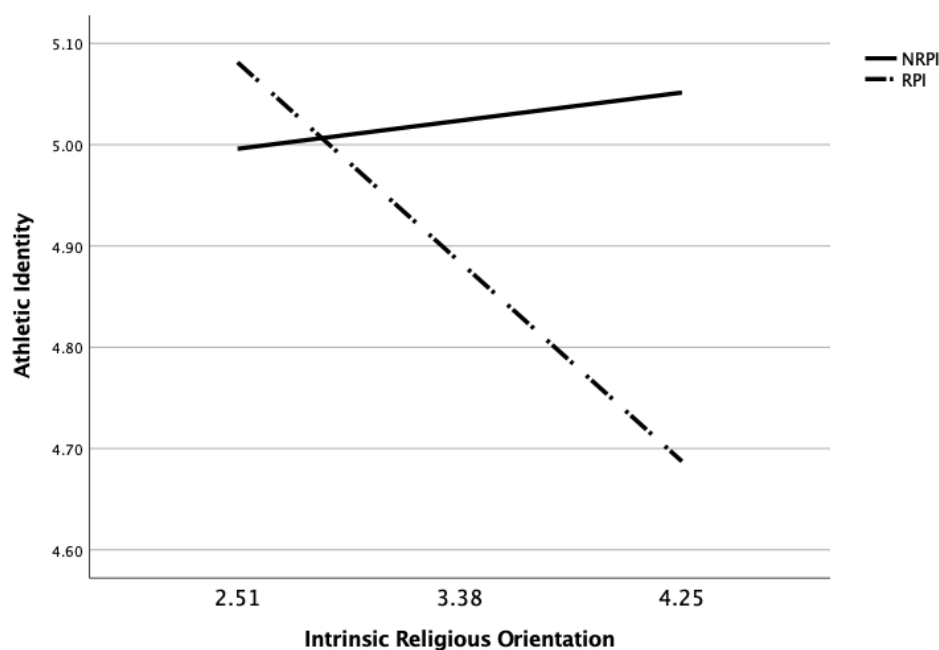


Figure 1.  
 Conditional Effects of Intrinsic Religious Orientation by Institutional Affiliation

### Post Hoc Analyses

Observed differences in correlations between ROs and athletic identity of student-athletes competing at NRPIs and RPIs led the researchers to probe the significance of these differences. To investigate these conditional effects, dichotomous moderation analyses were computed using *PROCESS* software. In the first analysis, intrinsic RO was specified as the predictor variable, athletic identity as the outcome variable, and institutional affiliation was explored as the potential

moderator. Results showed institutional affiliation to be a significant moderator ( $\beta = -0.26$ , 95% CI [-.42, -.10],  $p < .01$ ) of the intrinsic RO-athletic identity relationship. The interaction was probed by testing the conditional effects of intrinsic RO at both levels of institutional affiliation. As presented in Figure 1, the relationship between intrinsic RO and athletic identity was negative at RPis ( $\beta = 0.32$ , 95% CI [-.34, -.12],  $p < .01$ ), but non-significant at NRPIs ( $\beta = 0.32$ , 95% CI [-.09, .15],  $p = .61$ ).

In the second analysis, extrinsic RO was entered as the focal predictor of athletic identity and institutional affiliation was, once again, explored as the potential moderator. However, results revealed institutional affiliation was not a significant moderator ( $\beta = -0.14$ , 95% CI (-.03, .31),  $p = .12$ ) of the extrinsic RO-athletic identity relationship.

## Discussion

The current study examined the relationships among student-athletes' RO and their athletic identities before comparing them between student-athletes competing for institutions that differed on the basis of religious affiliation. Though previous literature has linked athletic identity to cognitive, emotional, physical, and social domains (Brewer et al., 2017), a more comprehensive understanding of athletic identity may require devoting greater attention to religious or existential factors (Seitz et al., 2014; Waller et al., 2016). This may be particularly relevant for student-athletes who already view religion as an important element of their lives (Seitz et al., 2014). The present study addressed this void in the athletic identity literature by providing initial evidence that student-athletes' RO were, in fact, associated with their athletic identities. Consistent with our hypothesis, student-athletes attending RPis reported significantly lower athletic identity and exclusivity than those at NRPIs. Further, student-athletes competing at RPis reported significantly higher intrinsic RO than their NRPIs counterparts, which echoed previous findings (Bell et al., 2009; Kelley et al., 1990). Additionally, data showed that average extrinsic RO among student-athletes did not differ, significantly, by institution.

While previous studies acknowledge the tendency for students and student-athletes attending RPis to report stronger intrinsic RO, compared to those at NRPIs, Kelley et al. (1990) were the only researchers to assess extrinsic RO at these institutions. In their study, student-athletes attending RPis scored significantly lower on extrinsic RO than those at NRPIs. While the current study was unable to replicate these findings, it is possible that evolving trends in American culture, which continue to reinforce individualistic values whereby the pursuit of individual success supersedes group success (Gao & Liu, 2018), could explain why student-athletes choose to use their religion for extrinsic benefits (e.g., enhanced personal performance or relief from pain or worry) regardless of institutional affiliation. Nevertheless, Kelley and colleagues (1990) showed student-athletes at RPis remained focused on winning to the same extent as those competing at NRPIs. In light of these similarities, individuals with strong intrinsic RO, striving to fulfill a purpose beyond sport, might not necessarily interfere with their commitment to, or enjoyment of, the competitive elements of sport itself. Rather, intrinsic RO might be more distinctly tied to how student-athletes approach their sport than what they hope to gain from it.

Results of post hoc analyses highlight the nuanced relationship between intrinsic RO and athletic identity, one not explicitly attended to in previous studies. Specifically, data showed that the direction of the relationship between intrinsic RO and athletic identity differs as a function of student-athletes' institutional affiliation. While the overall strength of one's religious beliefs may

still be positively related to athletic identity (Proios, 2017), the current data suggest institutional affiliation is associated with intrinsic RO and the way student-athletes interpret the salience of the athlete role. Moreover, student-athletes competing at RPIs may perceive the athlete role to be less important relative to other prominent identities in their salience hierarchy (e.g., student or family member) compared to those at NRPIs. At the same time, student-athletes at RPIs may develop a deeper commitment to their religious beliefs due to time spent in a culture that places positive value on religious beliefs and includes close friends, mentors, and staff who actively integrate religion into their daily interactions (Sedikides & Gebauer, 2010). Conversely, those at NRPIs may find themselves surrounded by influential others who have a stronger affinity for athletics and approach life in a way that reinforces the athlete role.

With respect to the exclusivity dimension of athletic identity, the present study found student-athletes attending NRPIs were more exclusively tied to the athlete role than those RPIs. This notable finding suggests student-athletes who attend NRPIs adhere more strongly to, and more significantly narrow their identity around the athletic role, compared to those competing at RPIs. While identity development is a complex process, such exclusive identities may hinder student-athletes at NRPIs from establishing a sense of identity beyond sport and may predispose them to identity foreclosure (Murphy et al., 1996; Petitpas & France, 2010).

While a state of identity foreclosure offers some temporary benefits known to promote athletic performance, it becomes increasingly problematic as student-athletes are more likely to play through pain (Weinberg et al., 2013) and incur injuries (McKay et al., 2013). Such maladaptive behaviors could translate into an abrupt career transition, which would expose them to further psychological distress (Park et al., 2013; Ronkainen et al., 2016). Athletes in these scenarios have been described as struggling for identity, which could lead to a missed opportunity to expand their identity (Kerr & Dacyshyn, 2000). The present study also found student-athletes who reported greater exclusivity of athletic identity also reported weak intrinsic RO, which could, theoretically, undermine future coping efforts. In other words, student-athletes who overly identify with the athlete role may be left with one less role to explore and fewer coping resources to draw from during unanticipated transitions. However, the behavioral impact of this relationship is still unclear. That is, some research suggests that overly identifying with one's athletic identity to the detriment of other aspects of identity can harm the student-athlete in terms of their physical, mental, and social well-being (Champ et al., 2020). However, other research suggests that multiple, highly salient roles can also lead to conflict or distress when called upon to enact multiple roles simultaneously (Di Lu et al., 2018). Thus, our findings support that strength of athletic identity is negatively associated with intrinsic RO, but whether this functions to harm or protect the student-athlete is yet to be determined.

Overall, post hoc analyses offered a more refined perspective of religion emphasizing the importance of RO rather than the strength of religious beliefs. These findings were particularly notable as intrinsic RO was only associated with athletic identity among student-athletes at RPIs, and not among those at NRPIs. Our findings are consistent with previous work by Di Lu et al. (2018), which suggests that organizational factors (i.e., institutional affiliation) also have the capacity to impact identity development of student-athletes.

Results also indicated that, among student-athletes at both RPIs and NRPIs, intrinsic RO correlated positively with extrinsic RO. This finding suggests that student-athletes high in intrinsic RO may also be likely to rely on their religion for extrinsic purposes (e.g., coping with injury or uncertainty) regardless of their collegiate environment. While it may seem counterintuitive for student-athletes to hold both intrinsic and extrinsic religious orientations, it is

important to recognize that these beliefs often coexist to some extent (Maltby, 2002). Moreover, it is plausible that student-athletes' intrinsic/extrinsic RO might be context-dependent. For example, student-athletes may rely on intrinsic beliefs to guide behavior while interacting with others during athletic competition, while more private and introspective moments (e.g., bus rides, showers, hotel rooms) may be governed by more extrinsic oriented beliefs. Interestingly, this relationship was most pronounced among student-athletes at NRPIs, which may suggest a tendency for such players to use both orientations across multiple situations. Conversely, those attending RPIs may be less compelled to do so. Future research might consider examining the contexts in which intrinsic versus extrinsic RO are more salient for student-athletes and the implications this could have on behavior.

### *Limitations*

Findings must be interpreted within the bounds of inherent study limitations. First, data presented in the current study were cross-sectional in nature. Therefore, findings are unable to infer causality and serve, instead, as an initial step toward understanding the complex relationship between dimensions of athletic identity and RO. In line with this limitation, the magnitude of relationships between study variables were modest as RO represents just one of many factors involved in the continuously evolving process of identity formation. Although religion remains an important domain for student-athletes to explore, other non-traditional identities (e.g., vocational, cultural, sexual orientation) may also have valuable explanatory power.

Second, findings presented are based on self-reported indices of religious beliefs and athletic identity whereas affective and/or behavioral outcomes were not assessed. Although interpretations of data were in line with previous research, additional work is needed to determine the extent to which shifts in religious beliefs or roles may translate into student-athletes' ability to manage career transitions or effectively cope with psychological distress known to follow. Third, in an attempt to limit participant fatigue, improve participation, and explore the primary research questions focused around institutional comparisons, questionnaires were limited to essential study variables. As such, student-athletes were not asked to report race/ethnicity, religion or specific religious denomination, or the extent to which they agreed with their institution's doctrinal principles. Each of the aforementioned variables represents a worthwhile direction for future research that has the potential to enhance the external validity of the current findings.

Finally, the measure used to assess religious orientation – the ROS-R – and the corresponding constructs of intrinsic and extrinsic RO have been previously critiqued as uniquely relevant to American Protestantism (Flere & Lavrič, 2008; Hill & Dwiwardani, 2010; Hill & Maltby, 2009). While some of the ROS-R items use neutral language expected to be applicable across religions (e.g., “I enjoy reading about my religion”), other items adopt more Christian-centric language (e.g., “I go to *church* because it helps me make friends”). Thus, the ROS-R may not sufficiently measure RO among religious individuals who attend a synagogue or mosque, for example, as their place of worship. In addition, some research suggests the constructs of intrinsic and extrinsic RO may not be relevant to non-Christian populations and/or within collectivistic cultures (Hill & Dwiwardani, 2010; Hill & Maltby, 2009). While the primary aim of the present study was to compare the unique impact of intrinsic and extrinsic RO

on athletic identity, these critiques highlight the limitations of the present study and the generalizability of the findings outside of an American, Protestant context.

### *Future Directions*

Moving forward, researchers should employ prospective and longitudinal study designs to gain insight into the temporal and causal effects of RO and athletic identity (Chen et al., 2010). To date, it remains unclear whether student-athletes are simply attracted to institutions that offer programs that promote ideologies that align with their RO or if such perspectives are fostered over the course of the program, or both. This question is particularly salient as the developmental stage of the traditional college student is known to be a crucial time for exploration and negotiation of religious values and beliefs (Barry & Nelson, 2005). Thus, a deeper understanding of how RO develops over time and the extent to which institutional ideologies and athletic participation influence identity formation is a fruitful avenue for further investigation.

While these efforts would offer a better understanding of how the RO and athletic identity develop throughout the course of a collegiate career, future research might also consider examining these relationships at different levels of collegiate competition (e.g., Division I vs Division II) as previous work has linked differences in athletic identity with variation in competition level (i.e., elite, recreational, non-participant; Lamont-Mills & Christensen, 2006).

Quantitative data alone cannot fully capture the experience of student-athletes. Therefore, future efforts should also be directed toward conducting qualitative interviews or focus groups intended to provide a more accurate account of student-athletes' lived experiences at both RPIs and NRPIs. Such research may offer new insight into the developmental trends of religious orientation among student-athletes. As a result, such investigations may facilitate the development of meaningful interventions designed to guide and support athletes who may be interested in exploring religion as another relevant facet of their identity with potential for positive impacts on student-athlete satisfaction and overall well-being.

Although the current study focuses primarily on the role religion plays in student-athlete identity, future researchers may consider exploring the intersection of athletic identity and other relevant cultural identities including race, ethnicity, nationality, vocation, gender, sexual orientation (Schinke et al., 2018). Such work would contribute to a more comprehensive understanding of the student-athlete experience and could be used to inform best practices for supporting the holistic needs of student-athletes.

### *Conclusion*

In sum, student-athletes competing at RPIs reported quantifiable differences related to the saliency of their religious orientation(s) and athletic identities relative to those competing at NRPIs. Current data supports previous research that suggests student-athletes competing at RPIs report higher intrinsic RO and lower athletic identity than those competing at NRPIs. These findings highlight religious beliefs as a relevant psychosocial factor that offers an alternative way for student-athletes to gain a sense of who they are beyond the traditional roles of the student and athlete. Additionally, data lend support to the value of assessing RO, over more global measures of religiosity, as it acknowledges the way student-athletes approach their religion may differentially impact their commitment to the athletic role. Furthermore, post hoc analyses show



institutional affiliation plays a part in the way the athletic role manifests among collegiate student-athletes, which could hold implications for the way they approach their sport and manage their interactions with others across various life domains. Finally, the current study addressed the call of previous research (Bell et al., 2009; Chen et al., 2010; Storch et al., 2004; Sturm et al., 2011) by examining the role of religion and athletic identity among student-athletes across a variety of athletic levels with an emphasis on those competing at the NCAA Division II level.

Findings are consistent with identity theory in that student-athletes are exposed to others expected to embrace the attitudes, values, and behaviors that match the dominant role of their respective institutions (Stets & Burke, 2000). In other words, individuals at religious institutions may be more apt to embody religious values and practices promoted by their institution during their athletic performance (e.g., fair play, respect for opponents and/or officials), which could represent an important opportunity for them to expand their identity at a crucial point in their life.

Overall, the findings of the present study hold positive implications for future identity research directed toward deepening our understanding of the dynamic interplay among multiple identities of student-athletes and invites further exploration of non-traditional roles like religion. Findings also emphasize that the relationship between religious orientation and athletic identity can differ based on the institutional culture the student-athlete competes in. While future research is needed to examine the impact of various institutional qualities on the well-being of student-athletes, findings from the present study provide a steppingstone towards understanding how institutions can better support the holistic needs of their student-athletes.

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